

Enhancing Relationships

◆————◆

**Skills for better
relationships**



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***There are actually skills?
I thought it was
just chemistry.***

- ◆ Even good chemistry can change.
- ◆ Eventually all long term relationships (of whatever kind) depend upon people's skills at communicating and acting out of respect for each person's needs.



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***So my relationships
could work if I
had better skills?***

- While there is no guarantee that every relationship will continue forever, there are some skills we can help you with that can improve the quality of most relationships.
- We will focus on helping you decide what is most effective over the long haul in your relationships.



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Effective over the long haul?

- ◆ Everyone has impulses to act in ways that take care of their needs in the moment, but really mess things up in the long run.
- ◆ For example, you may have the impulse to laugh at your partner's new haircut, but that kind of honest response probably won't improve your relationship.
- ◆ Likewise, not speaking up about being hurt may keep things smooth in the moment, but it hurts the relationship in the long run.



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***Are you saying I
shouldn't always
be honest?***

- ◆ What we're saying is that there is more than one true thing happening at a time.
- ◆ The truth may be that you think your partner's haircut is ridiculous, but another truth that is probably more important is that you love him or her and want to treat them with kindness.



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I see what you mean

- ◆ So, we'll encourage you to choose the behavior that helps you meet your larger goals, rather than acting on impulse. This will help build your self-confidence and self-respect in addition to improving your relationships.
- ◆ We assume that there are many things that may be getting in the way of doing that currently.



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Like what?

- ◆ Often people are unaware that there is a particular problem, only that they are miserable or that things don't seem to work out right.
- ◆ We find that when you are more aware of what is actually happening, you make better choices.



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So noticing is the first step?

- Right.
- We will also encourage you to keep your larger goals in sight so that when strong feelings come up they aren't the only thing you're aware of.
- Are you ready for some skills?



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Sure, let's go

- ◆ Relationships work more smoothly when the needs and wishes of each person are respected.
- ◆ It also goes better when you are acting in a way that fits with your moral code.
- ◆ We want to help you learn ways to build those two things into your interactions so you can prevent some problems.



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***How could I do
those things in a
preventative way?***

Act in ways that make it easy for the other person to like and respect you.

- Keep your promises and commitments to them, including making time for them.
- Focus on the positives.
- Take turns giving and receiving.
- Be honest in a way that respects both of you and will strengthen rather than weaken the relationship.



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Keeping promises and commitments seems clear cut

- ◆ That's generally true. You do your best to be on time, to clean the bathroom if you said you would, etc.
- ◆ Sometimes you may have made a promise that you later realize you can't or don't want to keep (e.g., promising not to tell anyone that your partner drinks too much).



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So, how would I handle that?

- ◆ We'll talk more later about dealing effectively with conflicts, but for now imagine a way you might deal with that situation that would leave you feeling proud three weeks from now about how you handled it.
- ◆ It is also sometimes helpful to think about whether you would like the way you handled it to be published in the newspaper.



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***Got it. Now what
about focusing
on the positives?***

- You are probably in a relationship with this person because you enjoy or respect something about them. Tell them that.
- You need to be “clean” about it - it can’t be insincere, or a sneaky way to actually criticize.
- For example, “this meal you made is not as boring as usual” is actually negative. “You made a good meal tonight” is a positive.



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Why focus so much on positives?

- ◆ It takes about ten positives to counteract one negative interaction.
- ◆ It is important that your tone of voice and facial expression are positive as well as your words.
- ◆ For example, smiling and saying “thanks for putting gas in the car” is very different than saying the same thing with a smirk and a sarcastic tone.



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***Okay. What about
taking turns giving
and receiving?***

- ◆ This gets easily out of balance.
- ◆ If you are usually the one who receives (e.g., your out of town friend consistently drives to *your* house, or your friends are usually the ones who fix dinner and do the dishes) you may need push yourself to give back more.
- ◆ If you are typically taking care of the other person's needs, you need to occasionally ask them for specific things.



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***But shouldn't they just
know what I need?***

- That'd be nice, wouldn't it?
- Remember, we're talking about what is most effective here based on what is actually true, not what we wish were true.
- None of us are mind readers (which is sometimes a very lucky thing).
- It is perfectly okay to request help from someone you are friends with.
- Let's move on to honesty.



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When I'm honest it makes things worse

- It definitely requires complex skills and positive intentions.
- Most of us have had experiences of someone being “brutally honest” or saying something “for your own good”.
- It is important that you be honest about *your own feelings*. This is not the time to give the other person your “insights” into their crazy or annoying behavior.



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I don't quite get the difference

- ◆ Stay focused on how *you* are *feeling*.
- ◆ Only state indisputable facts.
- ◆ Stay away from characterizations of the other person (e.g., “you’re lazy”, “you don’t care about me”) or your ideas about *why* they did something, or what you think they *should* be doing.



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***That takes all the fun
out of it!***

- Maybe, but that old way just doesn't work very well in the long run.
- Here's an example. Pretend your boss made you stay late at work again because it was swamped. Your boss has outlawed personal phone calls. You come home and your partner says one of the two following things to you.
- Ready?



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Ready

Number 1: "I can't believe what an inconsiderate, self-centered person you are! You obviously don't care about me. Work is always more important. You always come home late for things. You don't care how much trouble I went to so we could have a nice evening. Why do I even bother?"



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***Okay, let's hear
number two***

"We made plans to go to the movies at 7 and you just got home - it's 9pm! I feel really mad and hurt. What happened?! I made a lot of phone calls to arrange for a babysitter. This happened last week, too. I was really looking forward to this and I don't want to keep feeling mad at you. I want us to straighten this out. When can we do that?"



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The first one made me want to argue

Here's what #1 did:

- Focused on her interpretation of what was wrong with the other person ("selfish, inconsiderate")
- Drifted from the facts and made assumptions about reasons behind behavior ("you don't care about me")
- Never offered a way to work this out



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***I was uncomfortable
in #2, but I thought
we could work it out.***

Here's what #2 did:

- Focused on her own feelings ("mad and hurt")
- Gave specific facts ("You said you'd be here at 7 and it's 9")
- Stated her intention ("I don't want to keep feeling mad at you")
- And asked for what she wanted ("to sort this out")



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***I see what you mean
about it taking
a lot of skill***

- Right. But like any skill, with practice it can become second nature. We'll talk more about using that model (assertiveness) later on.
- Are you ready to hear one last idea about how to keep relationships on track?



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Sure. What else helps?

- ◆ Try to treat the other person in the way they want to be treated. Don't guess what that is. Ask them.
- ◆ The Golden Rule is not always the best guide because different people have different ways they prefer to be treated.
- ◆ Take some time to think of your own ideas for nurturing your relationships.



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***Wouldn't what you
do change for different
kinds of relationships?***

- Good point.
- When there are power differences (e.g., one of you is the supervisor of the other, or this is a relationship with your probation officer) you won't be balancing giving and receiving, and you probably don't want to be closer emotionally.
- However.....



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However, what?

- ◆ However, the skills still apply
- ◆ You still want to honor your promises and commitments to them
- ◆ You still want to be honest in a respectful way
- ◆ You still want to treat them with respect
- ◆ And we all need to accept that even skillful behavior doesn't *always* work



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Is that it for the preventive stuff?

- ➔ Basically, though you will probably be able to figure out some additional things that work especially well in specific relationships.
- ➔ For example, in intimate relationships (so, not with your boss) you may want to share more of your personal thoughts and feelings.



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***So the rest of the skills
are about fixing it
when it's broken?***

- Or reducing the damage
- If you've ever had a flat tire on the highway you know that when it blows out you can drive a little ways on it, but if you try to drive too far the tire and rim are ruined.
- Relationships are like that.
- If there is some damage, take care of it while it is still fixable.



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***So, deal with problems
before they get too big?***

- ◆ Yes.
- ◆ Part of doing that might mean changing some of your thoughts and habits.



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Like what?

- ◆ People often “never mind” themselves when they feel hurt or angry at someone, telling themselves “never mind, it’s really no big deal”.
- ◆ That’s okay when it happens only occasionally and when it truly is minor, but if it becomes a habit, keeping quiet weakens the relationship.
- ◆ This doesn’t necessarily mean you need to talk about it at that exact moment, though.



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Why not?

- Because sometimes the intensity of feelings and thoughts of the moment make it difficult to keep the bigger picture in your awareness.
- Wait a short time until you can speak with your larger goals in mind, but don't wait so long that you never get around to bringing it up.



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***I feel like my emotions
get the best of me
in these situations***

- ◆ That's true for lots of women.
- ◆ You can do a few things to keep your emotions from ruling you (and worsening the situation):
 - Remind yourself that speaking honestly yet kindly gives you the best hope of improving the relationship.
 - Remember that your thoughts and worries are different from what is actually happening.



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***For me, it feels like I
don't get my needs
met much***

- ◆ There are a number of things that might be feeding into that, including an imbalance in giving and receiving.
- ◆ Most people's tendency is to focus on how the other person is not doing their part in the relationship.
- ◆ You may not like hearing this, but we will be focusing on your behavior, not theirs.



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But why?

- Because you have the most control over your own thoughts and behavior.
- What is true, however, is that being more skillful in relationships seems to bring out the best in others, so you increase your chances of being satisfied in relationships.
- Ready for the first step?



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Yes. What's my first step?

- Notice what's going on inside you (your thoughts and feelings) and in the relationship (what things occur over and over).
- If you are having a conflict, decide how important the issue is to you.
- Let's move on to the section about evaluating how important an issue is.



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